

High Rise Building Fire

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On 10/17/2003, a fire in the 35-story Cook County Administration Building resulted in the death of six office workers. The fatalities were confined to a single stairway that had become filled with smoke. Emergency exit doors could not be opened from the stairway side. Investigations are underway regarding the construction of the fire exits and the effectiveness of the emergency exiting procedures, as well as the efficacy of firefighting and rescue procedures.

One could ask if these issues apply to Wilson Hall, which is also a multi-story high-rise office building. The answer is that these issues were considered in the design and construction of the building. Could a fire in Wilson Hall have a result similar to the Cook County Building?



The short answer is Not Likely. Why?... Because:

- Wilson Hall is in full compliance with all national and local fire protection requirements.
- The south stairwell emergency exit doors do not lock. If necessitated by the situation, personnel can re-enter the building on any floor.
- There are fire sprinklers located throughout the building. The Cook County Building did not have sprinklers above the ground floor.
- Wilson Hall is equipped with a state-of-the-art alarm system that is tested on a quarterly basis. Exit instructions are only sent to affected floors, thus limiting the number of people who need to occupy emergency escape routes.
- Fire drills are conducted each year, even though they are not required by code. While exiting, emergency floor wardens sweep through his or her respective areas to make sure that everyone is accounted for. Floor wardens are neither required, nor are they frequently encountered in other high-rise buildings.

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- When a fire alarm is activated, the four main elevators are automatically returned to the first floor for the Fire Department's use in transporting personnel and equipment. The Fire Department does not rely solely on the stairway to gain access to the fire.

*In Other Words... **The conditions that contributed to the fatalities in the 10/17/2003 fire in the Cook County Administration Building are essentially absent in Wilson Hall.***

Not only that, but:

The Fermilab Fire Department can typically arrive at Wilson Hall within five minutes of an alarm. Automatic alarms are also sent to Batavia and Warrenville; these fire departments can be on the scene within 10 minutes. Members of the Lab's fire department are very familiar with Wilson Hall due to monthly inspections they carry out in this building.

Fire protection inspections are routinely conducted throughout Wilson Hall by a variety of individuals. Therefore, the risk of exit routes being blocked closed or open is significantly reduced.

What if there is a fire in Wilson Hall?

To help assure that the fire escape routes in Wilson Hall remain functional, do not prop open fire doors. If kept closed, the rate of smoke and fire spread between adjacent areas is significantly reduced. You should also take care not to block exit pathways with equipment storage, furniture, waste materials, etc. and follow all exiting instructions.

When a fire alarm is activated, exit the building and go to the designated safe location at least 100' from the structure. This way you will not impede emergency vehicles or the tasks of the fire department. Do not re-enter the building until the Incident Commander gives the "all-clear". If your expertise is needed, the Incident Commander will summon you to the command post.

What if there is a fire in another high rise office or hotel?

When visiting other high-rise buildings, be sure to familiarize yourself with warning sounds and escape routes. Read the emergency planning literature that is available in the hotel room. Make a mental plan of the actions you would take. Check the escape routes that are posted on the back of hotel doors. It is a good idea to actually walk-down the escape route if that can be done without tripping off alarms.